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ABSTRACT

Characteristics of outstanding faculty are considered, based on descriptions provided by 46 University of North Dakota students who were nominated for the university's 1982 Outstanding Teacher Awards. Based on descriptions in the students' own words, 124 separate characteristics were identified, and categorized as follows: teacher-student relationships, knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject matter, teaching strategies, communication skills, and the teacher as a person. Teacher-student relationships received the most comments. Students' own relationships with teachers were valued more highly than a teacher's actual performance in the classroom. Students want teachers to be sensitive to them as individuals as well as students, and to be interested in their academic and nonacademic growth. According to the students, an outstanding teacher establishes a relationship with students that motivates and excites them about the subject matter and encourages intellectual thinking and academic discipline. Students want to be made aware of changes, new discoveries, public issues, and criticisms regarding the subject matter, and want teachers to spend time preparing and organizing class instruction and searching for new and interesting ways to present the subject. Students appreciate effective teaching skills appropriate to the content, objectives, and clients. Outstanding teachers feel a responsibility toward education, are continually learning and expanding beyond their fields, and are working for quality teaching and learning inside and outside the university. Specific student comments are appended. (SW)

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INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT REPORT

Outstanding Teachers: How Do UND Students Describe Them?

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Outstanding Teachers: How Do UND Students
Describe Them?

Each year at the University of North Dakota students are given the chance to nominate full-time faculty members for Outstanding Teacher Awards. These awards, given to three faculty members recognized specifically for their excellence in teaching, are presented annually at UND's Founders Day banquet. The recipients are honored at the banquet and given a cash award.

This year 46 students participated in the nominations. Among the questions asked on the nomination form was: "I believe that an outstanding teacher possesses the following characteristics." This allowed students to describe in their own words those characteristics that make up an outstanding teacher, qualities they believe should be rewarded. These students' descriptions have been summarized in this report, as well as presented in full at the end.

Our hope, in the Office of Instructional Development, is that such a presentation might serve as a point for discussion about outstanding teaching within the university. Outstanding achievement should be rewarded. When one accomplishes a well-done job, a pat on the back is both desired and deserved. Sometimes a reward is a driving force in our work, while at other times it's an extra lift to our self-motivated efforts. Whatever the case may be, somewhere behind that reward is an accomplishment, and behind the accomplishment is a person with certain characteristics worth admiring, even emulating.

These descriptions can be helpful to us as individual faculty members as well, as we measure and attempt to improve our own teaching. Knowing what students consider as outstanding in their teachers, though not sufficient as a recipe for effective teaching, suggests important ingredients.

But what do students consider worth rewarding? What characteristics do they ascribe to outstanding teachers? In this year they listed 124 separate characteristics. Many of these, of course, have something in common. With this in mind we have lumped them into five areas: 1) teacher-student relationships, 2) knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject matter, 3) teaching strategies, 4) communication skills and 5) the teacher as a person. If a mold was made to produce an outstanding teacher from the list of characteristics they described, we would have a teacher that genuinely loves students and is concerned for their academic, intellectual and personal growth; has a vast knowledge and love for the subject matter, which are communicated to students; organizes courses with current methods that stimulate learning, produce intellectual growth and evaluate accurately; is concerned and interested in education, learning and teaching as a whole; and has a personality containing likeable and enjoyable qualities. These characteristics outline a job more than well done. In students' view a teacher that fits this mold is truly an outstanding teacher, deserving recognition and reward.

A closer look into each area reveals specific traits that students feel are important to achieve excellence in teaching. Teacher-student relationships received the most comments. Students' own relationships with teachers were valued higher than a teacher's actual performance in the classroom, either with technique or content. Students want teachers to be sensitive to them as individuals, showing concern for them as a student and as a person, interested in their academic and non-academic growth. One student made the statement that

"an outstanding teacher listens to students as much as he talks to them." Students say an outstanding teacher has "interest in the student and his needs," a "genuine concern for students," and an "interest in the education of students."

A teacher that finds time for students rates as outstanding; students describe them as "available for discussion," "accessible to students when they need help," and approachable for students who need "time to talk." Students want comfortable teacher-student interactions, a relationship with their teacher that allows them to freely exchange ideas, ask questions, solve problems and get advice.

An outstanding teacher establishes a relationship with students that motivates and excites them about the subject matter and encourages intellectual thinking and academic discipline. Students admire someone who will challenge them, expecting a student to give 100% during a course. According to one student "an outstanding teacher will demand a student's best and will help him to achieve it."

Subject Matter

The most basic definition of a teacher describes one who communicates knowledge to another person, resulting in the learning of that knowledge. Most students view a teacher as a storehouse of information, eager to dispense that knowledge. Teachers are expected by students to have "a thorough knowledge of the subject matter." Students rely heavily on a teacher for information and believe that a teacher "should be a true commander of the subject he or she teaches."

Specifically, students believe that outstanding teachers "should keep up with changes and be able to indicate in class how any changes in the field have an impact in both the practical as well as the theoretical."

Students want to be made aware of changes, new discoveries, public issues, and criticisms regarding the subject matter. According to one student "an outstanding teacher commands an important subject matter and can relate it to other fields and knows its application in the larger community." If an instructor has "mastered the subject matter" students believe he is more able to help students "relate it to the real world."

It's not enough for outstanding teachers to have a vast amount of knowledge; students look for teachers who have enthusiasm for what they teach. One student commented that "the instructor should enjoy the material being taught." Students say that "a teacher should know and be interested in the material he is teaching, as well as be enthusiastic about it." Enthusiasm for a subject or the lack of it can be contagious, and an instructor plays a large role in this factor. This enthusiasm displays, in students' view, an instructor's "ability to engender in his students a desire to learn more," "an ability to make subject matter come alive," a "desire to update course material" and a "willingness to find out answers to questions he is not sure of."

Strategies

Classroom strategies - course objectives, methods of presentation, student requirements and evaluation procedures - are important elements in outstanding teaching, and UND students want to be informed about these elements at the beginning of each course. A teacher who spends time preparing and organizing class instruction, searching for new and interesting ways to present the subject, rates high with students, indicating an enthusiastic attitude, concern and interest in students. Students believe that teachers must spend time preparing for class, but they also believe that outstanding

teachers do more in their preparation than other teachers; they work harder to "create a learning atmosphere" and "to present course material in a manner which students find both stimulating and meaningful."

Students want a teacher who is flexible and creative, "one with a variety of effective teaching skills appropriate to the content, objectives, and clients." The class presentations, according to students, should "generate interest," "be both stimulating and meaningful" and "promote intellectual development." Students want teachers that have the "ability to organize materials and to set a satisfactory pace in achieving the objectives of the course." They want teachers who are "demanding, but also encouraging" and who "maintain high standards."

Students also commented on evaluation procedures, desiring a teacher that "grades everyone fairly." Students described an outstanding teacher as an impartial grader, evaluating individual performance objectively. If students are informed of teacher objectives from the beginning they will "know what is expected of them and the instructor knows what he wants accomplished."

Communication is an important area in teaching. Students want teachers to communicate their knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject matter in ways that they can understand. A teacher who has "the ability to make difficult subjects easy to learn" is an outstanding teacher in students' eyes. Students described an outstanding teacher as one who has "the ability to relate their knowledge to their students" and "the ability to communicate interest, enthusiasm and understanding." Another student said a teacher must have the "capacity to examine life from a variety of perspectives and make those perspectives accessible and comprehensible to students." Communication, in order to produce learning, requires effort and willingness on the part of a

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teacher, reflecting a desire to teach and be understood. Students say this desire "both encourages and increases the student's enthusiasm about the field."

The Teacher as a Person

Student relationships, knowledge and enthusiasm, strategies and communications skills are all key areas for a teacher to develop in order to be effective within a course. According to student comments the outstanding teacher stretches beyond what happens in the classroom, developing qualities that are respected in other professional areas and in the non-academic world. Students say that an outstanding teacher is "committed to quality education," "interested in the profession of teaching," "interested in non-class related activities," and is "involved in community affairs."

Students see it to their benefit to have an instructor that is aware of, concerned or involved in current issues, applying the realities of life in some way to the subject matter. Students also want an instructor who is "genuinely interested in the partaking of knowledge," "has done (and continues to do) serious intense research," and is "motivated to serve and teach." In students' view a teacher committed to quality education is concerned with the total growth and intellectual development of students, enriching their opinions, attitudes and interests in the academic world.

Finally, students want a teacher to be someone they can respect, like and enjoy as a person. Comments indicated that an outstanding teacher possesses qualities we admire in most human beings. Students say an outstanding teacher has a "sense of humor," a "high degree of patience," "enthusiasm, intelligence, approachability," and "integrity, wit, humility." Students want a teacher who is "dynamic, outgoing, willing to go out on a limb for someone in need and believes in himself and in his occupation."

They believe that outstanding teachers, who are worthy of being rewarded for their teaching achievements, should also have personal lives worth admiring.

These are the characteristics found in outstanding teachers described by UND students. Achieving excellence in teaching, using students's standards as one guidepost, seems to require attention in a number of areas. According to our students an outstanding teacher has a responsibility toward the student - supplying and communicating information, organizing and preparing stimulating courses, and being available for help; a responsibility toward the subject matter - possessing a thorough knowledge and genuine enthusiasm for it and a desire to remain current in the field; and a responsibility toward education - continually learning and expanding beyond one's own field and working for quality teaching and learning inside and outside the university. When a teacher has fulfilled these responsibilities and developed these characteristics defined by students, he has accomplished a job well done, deserving of the title - Outstanding Teacher - one worthy of an award.

Characteristics of Outstanding Teachers,
as Defined by UND Students*

I. Teacher-Student Relationships

- fully aware of her students' needs and desires in the classroom and structures the classroom around that
- sensitive to students' needs and level of understanding
- understanding of wherewithal/or level of understanding of student
- personality: humanist (is more concerned with the student's growth than in achieving personal goals at the student's expense)
- possesses student attention, which includes understanding, humbleness, willingness to give individual help and lots of encouragement
- capacity to excite students and colleagues intellectually
- interested in the student's individual requirements and concerns
- genuine interest in the education of students
- interest in the student and his needs
- interest in the student personally
- genuinely cares about students (comment made by 2 students)
- genuine concern for students (comment made by 4 students)
- a concern for academic growth of each student
- a concern that the student gains an understanding of materials
- An outstanding teacher listens to students as much as he talks to them, learning their relationship to, their attitudes toward, his field, nearly as well as he knows his own. Therefore, he knows the needs of his students and adapts his teaching to meet those needs.
- always willing to help (comment made by 2 students)
- does all he can to help in any way with materials

*Verbatim responses to the question "I believe an outstanding teacher possesses the following characteristics:" given by 46 students who nominated University of North Dakota faculty members for Outstanding Teaching Awards in 1982.

- willingness to give assistance to students outside of the classroom
- has an "open door policy," always ready to explain complications in the subject matter and give advice when it is requested
- accessible to students when they need help
- available for discussion
- A good teacher should be available to the students when they need help and assistance.
- availability to students, both professionally and personally
- very helpful, doesn't play favorites, is always there if students need assistance
- When students need her, she finds time to talk with them.
- Office hours should be told to students and students should be encouraged to meet with their teacher when they feel it is necessary. The outstanding teacher will possess an awareness of being a positive role model for his/her students, both academically and personally, recognizing that students need successful human goals personified in those who attempt to instruct them in their career choices.
- The instructor should make time for the students, setting aside weekly office hours that are flexible. Instructors should have a positive attitude, realizing that students don't know it all and will ask dumb questions.
- expect student to exert himself for the class yet also understand when the student must sometimes put the classwork second to another activity
- An outstanding teacher will demand a student's best and will help him to achieve it.
- impartial in dealing with students
- He should teach his subject with fairness to all students, making himself available when a student needs help.
- should always handle the students' problems politely
- objectivity with students

II. Knowledge and Enthusiasm for the Subject Matter

- a thorough knowledge of the subject matter (comment made by 6 students)
- understands his subject (comment made by 2 students)

- expertise in his field and in methodology
- excellence in his/her particular field
- competent
- must be well qualified for his or her position
- wide (well-rounded) knowledge base with several areas of marked expertise
- should be a true commander of the subject he or she teaches
- knowledge about the field that brings new insights
- An outstanding teacher commands an important subject matter and can relate it to other fields and knows its application in the larger community.
- and, very importantly, a thorough understanding of his subject and how it relates to the rest of the world
- one who applies theory as well as practical and cultural knowledge in the classroom
- He must have mastered the subject matter, not only in a theoretical sense but in a practical sense as well, so the students can relate it to the real world.
- undisputed competence in his/her field(s) of study, combined with a demonstrated awareness of the importance of interdisciplinary cooperation
- The instructor should keep up with changes in the field that have an impact in both the practical as well as the theoretical.
- interest in and enthusiasm for the subject matter (comment made by 4 students)
- A teacher should know and be interested in the material he is teaching, as well be enthusiastic about it.
- enthusiasm for subject matter, . . . willingness to find out answers to questions he is not sure of
- The instructor should enjoy the material being taught.
- enthusiasm about his/her chosen field, students, life, desire to update course material. update his/her opinions
- desire and ability to stay current with subject matter
- keeps himself current and enthused about new developments

III. Teaching Strategies

- one with a variety of effective teaching skills appropriate to the content, objectives, and clients
- creating a learning atmosphere, including discipline, then enriching the student
- one who applies theory as well as practical and cultural knowledge in the classroom
- The instructor should indicate all objectives, goals, and requirements of the students immediately. That way the students know what he/she wants accomplished.
- The ability to do this requires hard work through preparation for class, research in the relevant areas of study and practical experience in that area outside the theoretical setting of school. It is very important that students learn the theories of why and how things work, but it is even more important to demonstrate to these students the practicality of these theories in their application to an everyday work situation.
- conscious striving to promote the overall intellectual development of the students by encouraging a synthesis of manifold discipline
- ability to present course material in a manner which students find both stimulating and meaningful
- courage to present new ideas, to challenge students, to buck the system
- always seeks new and more interesting and helpful ways to teach subject
- gets the class motivated and interested in subject (comment made by 3 students)
- encourages enthusiasm in the subjects he teaches, through his teaching students acquire incentives to learn outside the classroom
- teaching methods which stimulate interest in the material (comment made by 3 students)
- the ability to engender in his students a desire to learn more
- must have the ability to imbibe interest and inquisitiveness of the student with respect to the subject concerned
- an ability to make subject matter come alive
- creative (comment made by 3 students)
- imaginative, flexible (comment made by 2 students)

- ability to organize materials and to set a satisfactory pace in achieving the objectives of the course
- organized and prepared for lectures and laboratories
- well-organized class hours
- lectures down-to-earth
- The instructor should use any equipment efficiently and effectively. Also important is the prompt evaluation of exams, tests, or quizzes. The students should have a syllabus that is workable.
- demanding, but also encouraging - sets an example for the work demanded in their students by the pride taken in their own continuing studies
- maintains high standards, organizational abilities
- grades everyone fairly (comment made by 4 students)
- one who has demonstrated fairness, commitment, utility
- shouldn't be partial in judging each student's scholastic activity

IV. Communication Skills

- the ability to communicate effectively with students (comment made by 2 students)
- have the ability to relate to his/her students
- the ability to communicate knowledge (comment made by 4 students)
- the ability to communicate interest, enthusiasm and understanding
- an ability to relate their knowledge to their students in a way that both encourages and increases the students enthusiasm about the field
- He is able to bring his enthusiasm for his subject and for learning to his students.
- He must possess a desire to communicate that interest to his students and have the ability to communicate those interests and ideas.
- ability to make complex subjects understandable to students
- must be able to teach in a manner that students can understand and learn from
- the ability to make a difficult subject easy to learn by the majority of students if not all students in course

- capacity to examine life from a variety of perspectives and make those perspectives accessible and comprehensible to students and colleagues
- succinct in lectures, . . . clear speech, . . . ability to answer questions in class with humility and aptness

V. The Teacher as a Person

- a commitment to quality education
- motivated to serve/teach
- interested in the profession of teaching
- genuinely interested in the partaking of knowledge
- willingness to continue learning
- She says "yes" to life, and there in, yes to learning in all its forms.
- interested in non-class related activities
- professionally involved at the local, state and national levels
- The teacher should in some degree be involved in community affairs.
- represents the University well; retains a great spirit of professionalism
- The teacher should be interested in and involved in the many facets of university life as pertains to their students, colleagues and the community in which he/she resides. It is the student's benefit to have their instructor exhibit a "working knowledge" of the larger concerns of modern life, because a totally isolated faculty becomes a community within themselves and denies the students the realities of life which ill-prepares them for a well-rounded education and life.
- The outstanding instructor will have future goals set for himself/herself. The instructor should be able to take criticism as a learning device.
- He has founded and continues his participation in offering and organizing classes and hosting conferences annually.
- has done (and continues to do) serious intense research
- sensitivity and flexibility, patience and enthusiasm
- sense of humor (comment made by 3 students)
- a warm person

- confidence in himself and the students
- integrity, wit, humility, inperturbability
- charisma
- reliable
- high degree of patience (comment made by 3 students)
- enthusiasm, intelligence, approachability, hard-working, dedicated
- dynamic, outgoing, willing to go out on a limb for someone in need; believes in himself and in his occupation; friendly
- An instructor should be a human being.
- He possesses a great deal of humanity.
- has a personal life that can be respected
- must be objective in dealing with all kinds of situations
- should be submissive to the authority that employs him or her
- An outstanding instructor should be able to separate personal life from the job.

Author Biographical Note

Carol R. Jacobson is a Graduate Student in English and a Graduate Student Associate in the Office of Instructional Development at the University of North Dakota. She teaches freshman composition, as well, and intends to have a career as a college teacher.